SUPERMAN

The Superman fantasy had a strong effect on all of us who grew up in the 1940s. I had my stash of ACTION, SUPERMAN, and WORLD'S FINEST COMICS neatly stored on a bookshelf near my bed and I guarded them carefully against the potential attacks of my younger brother and sister who were prone to fight over them and tear them up rather than read and cherish them. When we played in the yard after school it was always a battle to see who would play Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman. Costumes were makeshift, usually a towel around my neck held in place with a safety pin. Flying was running while making a kind of swishing sound by pursing the lips and blowing air through them. It was easier to get into a flying fantasy on a bicycle, but I was nearly out of my Superman phase by the time my Schwinn came along.

Most of the **SUPERMAN** quarterlies I had showed the Man of Steel in a humorous situation. I remember one of them had him breaking a barber's scissors with his hair. This made me wonder how Luthor could cut that hair of Superman's so easily in **SUPERMAN IV**. I expect the invulnerable one did get a haircut now and them or he would have looked like a Jewish hippy, but where he got his trim is anyone's guess. Kryptonian scissors back at the old Fortress of Solitude?

The comic stars of the forties had a way of looking like popular movie actors and actresses. If you traced their photographs, you'd see this right away. Superman would look a lot like Cary Grant, Captain Marvel like Fred MacMurray, Dick Tracy like James Cagney (trace his profile and see), and Wonder Woman like Hedy Lamarr. I thought it was funny when the characters went on film, because few of them were played by actors who looked anything like them. Ralph Byrd was okay, but he was no Cagney and George Reeves just looked like a chubby middle-aged man in a pair of pajamas with an S on them. The movies have done better lately. Chris Reeve is light years beyond his predecessors and Linda Carter put much more life into Wonder Woman than she ever had in the comic book.

DC Comics is celebrating the 50th birthday of Superman this year for some strange reason, but he's really 55. The first story was laid out by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster in 1933. Both were Cleveland high school students and avid Science Fiction fans. Philip Wylie's novel, **GLADIATOR** (1930), is the main origin of Superman with Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon contributing costumes and special effects. It's very likely Superman wound up with cape and boots because Alex Raymond was prone to trace movie stills into **FLASH GORDON** and he preferred swashbuckling action a la films about **ROBIN HOOD, THE THREE MUSKETEERS,** and parodies of romantic adventure like **CYRANO DE BERGERAC** and **THE SCARLET PIMPERNEL.**

Superman was the ultimate fantasy for a pair of young Jewish boys growing up in an anti-semitic environment. Siegel and Shuster were both short men, both small in school, and it's likely they had their share of pushing around from the athletes. Through Superman, they could express themselves, get back at the bullies, get even. Just as they were forced to keep their own identities secret, so it would be for their character, and Superman took on the guise of Clark Kent early in his earthly life. The name was a combination of Clark "Doc" Savage and Kent "The Shadow" Allard, thus linking Superman with pulp science fiction tradition. It was a fantasy all boys could enjoy. We knew we were really a lot more than the adult world suspected, that we were super people, that one day we would throw off the uniforms put on us by the adult world and fly away to freedom. We might have our lunch money stolen on the playground or get tripped on the stairs, but nothing like this would ever happen to Superman! When he was put together from various sources by these two high school boys, America had just gone into a serious economic depression, one which would last until the beginning of World War II in 1941. Grown men, thrown out of work, unable to feed their families, would gain some symbolic relief from the fantasies in **SUPERMAN**, and they did. Do not think the millions of comic books sold in the thirties and forties were sold specifically to children. Comics were widely read by soldiers and sailors on the battlefields and Superman was on the cover of a magazine (now monthly) fighting the enemy.

The early Siegel and Shuster collaborations were simply cops and robber stories, more stimulated by the success of **DICK TRACY** (1931) than by many of the sources noted by Jim Steranko in his history of the comics. The boys had their own detective, Slam Bradley, but by 1933, gangster stories were too common and the possibilities for a human detective too limited. Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon had shown that it was time for super heroes to make a comeback. Hercules and Atlas must be reborn. Superman would be all of these and more.

In the beginning, Superman didn't fly. He leaped around like a grasshopper. He did this because Siegel and Shuster were imitating Buck Rogers who leaped around with the aid of an anti-gravity belt, but they were also copying Wylie's idea from **GLADIATOR**. In that fascinating novel, a scientist concocts a serum from the juices of various insects, one of which is a grasshopper, and injects it into his pregnant wife. The child is born with the qualities of these insects, one of which is the jumping ability of a grasshopper. In the first Superman story, Shuster even drew a grasshopper next to Superman so everyone would get the message. In the radio shows, which we heard at home everyday at 5:15, Clayton Collyer always said that Superman was "able to leap tall buildings with a single bound." Much later, he

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would be flying, not leaping. Whether or not the writers ever explained how this happened, I don't know. Superman was not the first flying character by any means. Angels flew in the Old Testament and fairies flew around in numerous 19th century tales. It was the fairy half of Peter Pan that enabled him to fly. L. Frank Baum had a boy flying around having adventures in his 1902, **THE MASTER KEY**, while winged men and women had appeared in numerous pulp stories.

In most comic book fantasies, there are no parents. Indeed, **DICK TRACY** begins with the death of the parents, giving Dick his lifelong motive, that of fighting crime and avenging their death. In **SUPERMAN**, the parents are killed off when Krypton explodes. The reason for this type of beginning is twofold. First, the reader is assumed to be a child and killing off the parents not only fulfills a child's fantasy of overthrowing the adult world and taking power, but it also moves him into immediate control, allowing him to experience the subsequent fantasy. He could not experience it freely with parents on the scene, but would have to repress it. We forget when we grow up that children often believe that adults can read their thoughts and this belief enforces repression. In many comic stories, the child can work out a patricide fantasy and a subsequent revenge fantasy. Included is a rescue fantasy, because the child often wishes a parent dead, then wants to save that parent from the death-wish. It is significant that Superman saves Lois Lane from death so many times over the years. Lois is Mom and Clark is meek and subservient around her as a child would be. He is also as protective as a son. Perry White is the stern father. The entire fantasy would not have endured to the present without incorporating all of these elements in an effective way.

There are serious problems in the material. Superman is an extra-terrestrial. Why would he hide his superior strength and lead a mundane life on this planet when he is capable of going anywhere in the universe he pleases? What would he care about human morality? Why would he fake a human life and deny himself? How could a pair of glasses hide his identity from someone who sees him everyday? Lois Lane would recognize him in a second. His magic trappings often make him absurd. His x-ray vision is an adolescent fantasy, nothing more than teenaged voyeurism. That Kryptonite would make him weak is as doubtful as red Kryptonite making him crazy. It was probably just LSD in disguise. Superman's motivation is never that clear. If he is a superior being, why is he always involved in such trivial activities? Why would he want to fight crime, to save humans from getting mugged? Why wouldn't he simply solve some of the serious social problems that cause crime? It was nice to see Superman getting rid of all the nuclear weapons in **SUPERMAN IV**, but what took him so long? Why would he even allow them to be made? So Jor-El told him not to interfere with humankind. So what? If he is a superior being, he would ignore advice like that and do what he saw to be the best for mankind.

That Superman is immortal is hard to deal with. If we think of the material at all, we have to realize that Lois Lane would be at least 70 by now, that Perry White would be long dead, and even Jimmy Olsen would be nearing his retirement. Superman, meanwhile, like Dorian Gray, would still be as young as he always was. We know he aged in the beginning, because we saw him grow from Superbaby into Superboy and finally into his current character, but for at least 55 years now he has looked the same, give or take artistic interpretations.

As product, Superman is still on top of it, still doing it for lots of kids and adults. He kept DC from going out of business when the comics slumped, because they made their money from licensing him, and all those millions made over the years aren't bad on an original investment of $130. The fantasy of Superman continues to compete, but the films have been aimed at adults more than kids, and there are many new characters who command attention these days. There was no Superman at the San Diego Comic Convention's costume contest, and this is an index of which characters are happening for the kids.

CLAY GEERDES

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DOG BOY 8 is out. If you're missing Steve Lafler's stuff, you shouldn't. USAGI YOJIMBO is up to 5 and still good reading. VIC BLOOD 1 is a good one, story by Harlan Ellison with art by Richard Corben. EL VIBORA 91 is $7.50 from J. M. Berengueur, Plaza Beatas 3, Barcelona, Spain. THE ICE KING OF OZ is superb. From First by Eric Shanower.*